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# Opening thoughts

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# 'Indisputable authenticity': engaging with the real in the museum

*Mary M. Brooks*

**ABSTRACT** Seligman, a 20th-century collector and historian, stated: 'The first duty of the museums is to give us the material necessary for the avoidance of errors, by the exhibition of choice and characteristic examples of indisputable authenticity' (Seligman 1922: 75). This paper explores different approaches to valuing the 'real thing' and the changing attitudes of museums to their role as the creators of 'authenticity', including possible tensions resulting from visitors' awareness of the changed 'reality' created through the conservation process. It looks at conservators' long engagement with ideas of authenticity and argues that a more open acknowledgement of the part played by conservation in creating visitors' experience of the multilayered tangible and intangible complexities of objects might also be an important step in developing public awareness of the social and cultural role of conservation.

## Introduction

The model of the museum as the creator and custodian of the 'authentic', defining the ideal 'real thing', has been increasingly challenged, both within and without the institution. This paper explores our complex attitudes to the 'authentic' and the 'real thing' in everyday life, our expectations of how we experience these culturally defined and shifting concepts in the museum and where conservation sits in this process. As such, it is less concerned with the generation of 'data' about the implications of the material realities of identification and intervention that have been addressed by many authors, for example Phillips (1997); nor does it discuss the different layers of authenticity that may be highlighted in a specific conservation intervention, as analysed by Eastop (2000). Rather, it aims to explore how attitudes to, and assumptions about, relative authenticities might inform engagement with the multilayered tangible and intangible complexities of museum objects. In

this, it parallels Jones and Yarrow's argument that authenticity in 'historic monuments' is 'neither a subjective, discursive construction nor a latent property ... but a distributed property that emerges through the interaction of people and things' (Jones and Yarrow 2013: 24).

## Valuing the 'real thing'

Modern western consumer society has an ambiguous relationship with the 'real thing'. On one hand, we want to know that our purchases are what we think they are. The United Kingdom Trading Standards Institute implements legislation against counterfeit artefacts that lack the qualities associated with the 'real thing' and may, indeed, threaten our health and our economy or be linked to exploited labour, organised crime, terrorism and illegal drug trading (Trading Standards Institute 2011). On the other hand, there is a thriving market for



imitations or fakes, whether these are handbags, medications or T-shirts. The desire for a status object or for a good deal may overcome caution and good sense. The imitation may even become desirable in its own right, gaining an authentic 'realness' of its own. Alongside websites telling us how to avoid buying a fake Louis Vuitton bag are websites enticing consumers to buy cheap imitations, sometimes openly acknowledged as 'fakes' (Kae; Luxurydream). Daniel Swarovski's vision was to create a 'diamond' for every woman but these are actually cut, polished and coated lead-glass crystals, sharing the same crystalline structure but not the same material composition as a cut and polished carbon diamond. The Swarovski Company stresses the 'authenticity' of its crystal 'diamonds' using laser-engraved logos, patented cuts<sup>1</sup> and certificates (Swarovski Elements). Far from being seen as inferior imitations, Swarovski crystals are presented as possessing authenticity as the 'real thing' in their own right and the internet provides potential purchasers with guidance on distinguishing real Swarovski crystals from fakes (Freedman).

The pressurised world of fashion consumption might seem far removed from concerns about how the authenticity of a museum object is established but it is clear that financial value is a consideration here. For example, the BBC's *Antiques Roadshow* has an interactive valuation game that can be played while watching the programme so viewers can pit their guesstimate of the financial value of the object against that of the expert (BBC 1). Fiona Bruce, the presenter in 2011, argued that the programme is about the relationship between objects and people: 'Exploring the human story behind every object is what makes *Antiques Roadshow* so fascinating.' She went on to note, however, that 'everyone loves the agony and ecstasy of the "what's it worth?" moment' and described:

some great finds such as an Egyptian stone head dug up in a garden worth £10,000, a medieval ring found on a farm and valued at £20,000 and a Meissen cup and saucer bought at a car boot sale for £2.50 ... worth £5,000 (BBC Wales 2011).

The message is clear: financial value confirms the identification of the rediscovered object as the 'real thing'.

The Courtauld Gallery's 1999 exhibition *The Value of Art: Is your Response to a Work of Art affected by its Financial Value?* tested the thesis of financial value as both affirming and confirming the 'real thing' while also acknowledging the role of the museum in creating authenticity (Hyde 1999). Sarah Hyde, the curator, wanted to investigate visitors' responses to the links between art and money. She presented pairs of old master paintings, prints, drawings, porcelain and silver under the challenging question, 'Which is more valuable?' with 'valuable' here being interpreted solely in financial terms. Text panels explained the objects, their makers, provenance and condition. Visitors were invited to slide back a panel revealing the financial value proposed by Sotheby's experts. The explanations of the differences in value provided intriguing insights into how these figures were calculated. While Degas' oil painting *Two Dancers on Stage* (1877) was estimated at \$32 to \$48 million, his pastel drawing *After the Bath, Woman drying Herself* (1899) was only valued at \$3,200 to \$4,800 (Vogel 1999). Both, of course, are the 'real thing', authenticated by provenance and style. The difference in their estimated values reflects both the material nature of the pieces and their different contexts. *Two Dancers* was valued more highly because it is a signed oil painting sold by the artist shortly after completion, whereas the unsigned work on paper, *After the Bath*, remained in Degas' studio, suggesting it was a study which possibly was unfinished.<sup>2</sup> The central question posed by this exhibition was whether or not the possible values placed on these paintings by the art market impacted on visitors' enjoyment of the experience of looking at the paintings; and if so, how.

Some evidence suggests that knowledge of financial value impacts on certain value judgements and even on pleasure. Researchers at the Stanford Graduate School of Business and the California Institute of Technology used wine tasting to test whether drinkers' belief in the cost of the wine they were drinking affected the degree of enjoyment they experienced in

drinking it.<sup>3</sup> Results showed that the part of the brain (the medial orbitofrontal cortex) that experiences pleasure became more active when drinkers thought they were drinking an expensive wine. In fact, they were actually drinking a wine they had previously tasted but believed to be cheaper. Perceived financial value had an impact on enjoyment.

Neuroscience does not seem to be able to provide the same clarity where financial values and aesthetics are concerned. Dara Djavan Khosehdel's research submitted for the competition 'So you want to be a scientist?' (*Material World*, BBC Radio 4) attempted to assess museum visitors' emotional reaction to looking at different qualities of art. Changes in the galvanic skin responses of 12 participants were monitored while they were looking at Graham Sutherland paintings in Modern Art Oxford with different insurance values – and therefore, presumably, different degrees of quality.<sup>4</sup> Khosehdel was 'seeking an objective measure of the value of an abstract work of art, removed from the cultural context', but results showed that emotional responses to paintings did not correlate to their financial value (Piekema 2012). There are many possible reasons for this and it is hard to draw conclusions about people's responses to abstract art. This does, however, underline the difficulty of objectively assessing responses to the 'real thing'.

### The museum as the creator and custodian of the 'authentic'

It is the 'real thing' that museums promote as their unique selling point, whether natural or man-made. The Chicago Field Museum has extolled its *Tyrannosaurus rex* skeleton as 'the real thing. Not a plastic model or a plaster cast. Not a patchwork or composite of bones from different specimens' (The Field Museum 2009). Real things are clearly what matter in the museum. A 2006 project undertaken by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) and the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, University of Leicester, asked

school pupils what they thought they had learnt from their museum visit. Children were asked to write or draw a spontaneous response to the question: 'What amazed me most on my visit?' Iqra, aged eight, was clearly moved by the Roman coins at the Museum of London, observing 'these artefacts are old and you have managed to keep them safe for us' (MLA 2006: 48–9). Such emotions surely inspire both museum visitors and professionals, however much the latter might aspire to objectivity.

The museum was long seen as having a unique responsibility in categorising the world, establishing the 'ideal' type and possessing the authority to set boundaries as to what was considered worthy of inclusion within the canon of the authentic. Georges Seligman, a Commissaire General du Gouvernement Français, collector and textile historian, expressed this position clearly: 'The first duty of the museums is to give us the material necessary for the avoidance of errors, by the exhibition of choice and characteristic examples of indisputable authenticity' (Seligman 1922: 75). Such absolutes are less than comfortable in the post-modern 21st-century museum, but the consequence of such thinking is clear: if it is in the museum, it must be 'real' by virtue of the context – unless it is identified as a fake. This seems to involve an element of 'magical thinking'.<sup>5</sup> Yet it is revealing of both why we care enough to keep and conserve artefacts, and the resulting distress when the magic fails.

Visitors tend to believe that what they see and experience in the museum is 'real'. Witness the disappointment of visitors to York Castle Museum in the late 1980s when they realised that the evocative smell they experienced in the sweetshop came from an artificial spray and not from the sweets themselves, even though a moment's reflection would have suggested that the glass window sealed off the aroma: 'magical thinking' indeed.<sup>6</sup> As Seligman observed, the context and function of the institution asserts the 'realness' of the things displayed but here the authenticity of the experience seems to be as important as the authenticity of the objects themselves.

The emotional responses of two commentators reflecting on 'real' museum objects are

indicative of the shock caused by the realisation of an apparently 'inauthentic' experience. Michael Green's reflections on the exhibition *Close Examination: Fakes, Mistakes and Discoveries* (National Gallery 2010) were presented under the emotive title 'How many of the paintings in our public museums are fakes?'. He asserts that 'forgery and faking ... merge with, and meld into, the world of restoration', so that 'the authentic historical object has withdrawn from us. What we see is an object willed into renewed life by loving restorers' (Green 2010). Oliver Glover's review of the conserved *Cutty Sark* sailing clipper in the *Museums Journal* asked, 'Is this the real thing or a superbly crafted copy?' (Glover 2012). Whatever we may think about such reactions, there seems to be real emotion behind them.

Museums are now openly addressing the problem of the 'inauthentic' object (rather than the conserved object), although describing to visitors the complex realities of such artefacts is problematic, emotionally charged and value laden: are they imitations, copies, replicas or plain fakes? Often there is financial embarrassment to be faced as well. It is, sadly, only too easy to cite famous examples of museums having bruising experiences where ~~museum~~ 'magical thinking' failed: objects that were believed to be 'real', and displayed as such, turning out to be quite the opposite. One well-known example is the so-called 'Getty kouros' (85.AA.40), bought for \$9.5 million by the J. Paul Getty Museum in 1985.<sup>7</sup> The appearance of a comparable fake and new scientific evidence resulted in an ambiguous revision of the statue's status. The museum's website notes:

Neither art historians nor scientists have been able to completely resolve the issue of the Getty Museum kouros's authenticity ... Yet the anomalies of the Getty kouros may be due more to our limited knowledge of Greek sculpture in this period rather than to mistakes on the part of a forger (J. Paul Getty Museum).

The museum now presents the contested authenticity directly to the visitor as 'Greek,

about 530BC or modern forgery' (J. Paul Getty Museum).

In the case of a Chinese bronze *gui* (food) vessel at the British Museum (1936.1118.65), conservation analysis helped to establish a new definition of the 'real'. Once believed to be from the late Western Zhou period (1046–771 BCE), the vessel's unusual patina raised concerns about this dating. Several campaigns of investigation using thermoluminescence and imaging established that the vessel probably dated from the much later Song to Yuan Dynasties when copies of *gui* bronzes were made in fashionable homage to the earlier dynasty (Wang *et al.* 2011). In this case, the antiquity of the replica provides a form of secondary authenticity that is acceptable within the museum, reflecting the significance of 'objects from the past ... as symbols of ancient values and traditions' (*Heritage Daily* 2012). Alternative authenticities are here layered into a single object and openly acknowledged.

Seligman's definition of the museum as possessing 'indisputable authenticity' is overturned in such instances, although a case could be made for the unknown makers, of whatever period and whatever their intentions, as possessing indisputable authentic skill. Nevertheless, narratives of changing beliefs in the 'authenticity' of the artefact are now being shared with the museum visitor. The museums cited here have vested their authority in an overt exploration of the ambiguities of the reality of these objects rather than asserting unambiguous absolute judgements.

### Conservation, authenticity and the real

Conservators have long debated the degree of intervention on an artefact that is acceptable and the ethical, moral and legal boundaries of the decision to prioritise a particular stage of the object's material and immaterial state (see, for example, Stanley Price *et al.* 1996). In his groundbreaking 1963 treatise, Brandi articulated the primacy of the 'material' for conservation: 'The physical nature of the work must

of necessity take precedence, since it represents the real "place" where the image is materialised' (Brandi 2005: 9). In 1942 the Istituto Centrale del Restauro, Rome, of which Brandi was director, mounted an exhibition of restored paintings as its first public event. The aim was to demonstrate 'what a real restoration treatment should be, i.e. a treatment based on full respect of the work's authenticity rather than the capacity to "adjust", complete or beautify, with results that often turned the work into a forgery of itself' (Basile 2005: 22). The real treatment of the real object needed to respect the effect of time.

Amongst the considerable literature on authenticity (UNESCO-ICOMOS Documentation Centre 2010), the 1994 *Nara Document on Authenticity* argues for the centrality of the concept noting that 'the understanding of authenticity plays a fundamental role in all scientific studies of the cultural heritage, in conservation and restoration planning', while also acknowledging that it is a challenging concept to define as 'in some languages of the world, there is no word to express precisely the concept of authenticity' (UNESCO Convention 1994). Jukka Jokilehto also notes this difficulty, commenting on the reinforcing circularity of the process of establishing 'authenticity' whereby the values embodied in the object are seen as a means of validating this status while themselves creating it (Jokilehto 1995: 32). Ideas of the real and the authentic are cultural constructs: different communities may have different ideas of where the real resides and may value the intangible aspects of an artefact as much as the tangible. Conservators are now well aware that they are engaged in preserving both the tangible and intangible, although the emphasis placed on these interlocking elements of authenticity has changed over time. For example, pesticide treatments of some Native American baskets were carried out to preserve their physical reality. However, this treatment, carried out with good intentions, now not only poses a very real toxic risk to museum staff and the source communities who use the baskets in their rituals, but may also have compromised their spiritual values (US Environmental Project Agency 2007).

## Making and unmaking the real

Conservators have an important role in recreating what is considered to be the 'real' and the 'authentic' in the physical object. Restoration and conservation are both acts of interpretation, which aim to overcome decay that is deemed unacceptable in order to allow 'users', whether researchers, curators or visitors, to engage with both the physical and metaphysical aspects of an object. European traditional practices often sought to minimise imperfections and incompleteness: surfaces should be smooth and often reflective; dust should be removed, over and over again; missing elements should, at the very least physically and very often aesthetically, be reconstructed. As Edensor put it, 'Work goes into the sustenance of an object over time. It is cared for, cleaned and polished, to bestow upon it an illusion of permanence, to keep at bay the spectres of waste and decay' (Edensor 2005: 317). In some cases, intensive intervention is necessary in order to regain or maintain an object's meaning and value. The degree of intervention that is acceptable is far from immutable as is demonstrated by the well-known history of the statues removed from the West Pediment of Aphaea Temple. Ludwig I of Bavaria employed the sculptor Thorvaldsen to undertake their reconstruction before they were displayed in the Munich Glyptothek. Thorvaldsen's additions have now been removed and replaced with a minimal interventionist approach (Wünsche 2005: 197). Here, ideas of the physical 'real' become conflated with ideas of the ideal. Concealing intervention may be considered necessary for aesthetic appreciation (Brandi 2005: 49) but it also conceals part of the biography of the object and possibly creates unreal expectations. However visitors have gone along with the 'magical thinking' that time stands still in the museum and have long expected objects to conform to certain aesthetics of perfection. This is now being challenged to some degree, for example in the display of unconserved pieces from the Staffordshire Hoard (Staffordshire Hoard 2012). Conservators have become increasingly open to the idea of retaining and exposing the passage of time and museums are even celebrating the 'wounded object'.<sup>8</sup>



Making and unmaking this idea of the real as expressed through the authentic object is a complex process, requiring sensitivity to physical evidence and intellectual responsiveness in modifying strategies. May Berkouwer has discussed the process involved in making adjustments to a proposed conservation plan when a conservation investigation revealed evidence that changed the status of the 'authenticity' of the real thing. The 17th-century wall hangings in the Queen's antechamber in Ham House, London, have long been considered to be ~~the only~~ hangings in the original context, supported by impeccable documentation, and long believed to have survived untouched. The discovery of previously unsuspected restoration and conservation was, '[A]t first ... disappointing [as] these – supposedly – unaltered examples of seventeenth-century wallhangings ... suddenly turned out to be not so authentic after all!' (Berkouwer 2012: 80). The revision of the status of these hangings provided new historical insights and connections and the conservation treatment was adjusted accordingly to reflect the new reality. In her discussion of the complexity of establishing authenticity in re-restorations of wall paintings in Tirsted Church, Isabelle Brajer highlights the different perceptions of the 'real' painting held by the church community and conservators and notes the importance of 'emotional values', arguing that it would be 'wrong to view different aspects of authenticity hierarchically' (Brajer 2009: 9). The perceptions of the 'users' of the conserved artefact and their ideas of what constituted its essential 'realness' were recognised as a significant part of the conservation decision-making process.

### Engaging with authenticity in conservation

This paper has argued that authenticity has shifting meanings and that, in the museum, this resides both in the object and in the experience of viewing the object. People seem to be unduly upset when they realise that much of the 'reality' of an object might be a construct. Many museums,

unless they are featuring an exhibition on conservation and restoration, do not acknowledge that the real objects on display have undergone treatment before they have reached the ideal 'real' state (Brooks forthcoming). Conservators' invisible creativity contributes to an object's history and has an impact on the way it looks. Relatively little is known about museum visitors' feelings about viewing the conserved object and how conservation influences their experience and enjoyment of the 'real' thing. Danai Koutromanou's research into visitors' perceptions of the conservator's work will be revealing here.<sup>9</sup>

Engaging with visitors' understanding of the reality of the conserved object may be as much a question of honesty in interpretation and communication, paralleling the acknowledgement of the 'fake' object, as changing our approaches to intervention and ethics (Brooks 2011). Acknowledging the part played by conservation in contributing to the presentation and interpretation of museum artefacts might also be an important step in developing public awareness of the social and cultural role of conservation.

### Notes

1. Swarovski AG (Wattens, Austria) originally used an edelweiss as their logo, which was replaced by the initials SAL in 1988: [www.crystalexchange.com/seekSwarovskiSwanBlockSC.html](http://www.crystalexchange.com/seekSwarovskiSwanBlockSC.html) (accessed 3 August 2013). Swarovski copyrighted the XILION cut in 2004: [www.create-your-style.com/Content.Node/swarovski-elements/Xilion.en.php](http://www.create-your-style.com/Content.Node/swarovski-elements/Xilion.en.php) (accessed 3 August 2013).
2. When a Degas pastel *Dancer in Repose* sold for \$27.9 million in July 1999, these figures were questioned. Hyde wondered 'if it would cause them [Sotheby's] to revise their estimates'. However, Melanie Clore, Chairman of Sotheby's Europe and Co-Chairman Worldwide, Impressionist and Modern Art, noted Sotheby's would not do this, arguing first that *The Value of Art* Degas estimates were in line with market values and, second, that *Dancer in Repose* was exceptional, because 'unlike most of the artist's pastels ... it is very painterly' (Vogel 1999). This assigned value suggests that, for the art market, the 'reality' of

- an oil painting is valued more highly than that of other forms of depiction.
3. Researchers recruited 11 male Caltech students who thought they were sampling five Cabernet Sauvignons, differentiated by price. They were actually given three wines but tasted two of these twice, once identified with the actual price and once at a higher price. The third wine was labelled with its real price. Functional magnetic resonance imaging was used to assess brain activity (Plassmann *et al.* 2008).
  4. For Khosehdel's art and neuroscience research diaries, see: [www.facebook.com/BBC.art.experiment#!/BBC.art.experiment](http://www.facebook.com/BBC.art.experiment#!/BBC.art.experiment) (accessed 23 November 2012).
  5. The definition of 'magical thinking' has been debated by anthropologists and cultural historians since the mid-19th century but is generally considered to be a blurring of the boundaries between subjective experience and objective reality and hence a conviction that mental beliefs can influence physical phenomena.
  6. Terry's sweetshop has been redesigned without the glass divider; see [www.yorkcastlemuseum.org.uk/Page/Visiting.aspx](http://www.yorkcastlemuseum.org.uk/Page/Visiting.aspx) (accessed 2 January 2013).
  7. For an account of the complex acquisition and investigation of this statue, see <http://traffickingculture.org/encyclopedia/case-studies/getty-kouros/> (accessed 26 November 2012).
  8. For example, the Musée du Quai Branly 2007 exhibition *Objets Blessés* explored the alternative value system for 'repaired' artefacts in some African cultures: [www.quaibrany.fr/fr/programmation/expositions/expositions-passees/objets-blesses-la-reparation-en-afrique.html](http://www.quaibrany.fr/fr/programmation/expositions/expositions-passees/objets-blesses-la-reparation-en-afrique.html) (accessed 6 August 2013).
  9. Danaï Koutromanou, PhD student, University of York, pers. comm., 4 January 2013.
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